

Back Again, Back Again: Soldier

Abigail: Hello hello, it's Abigail Eliza here with a quick little speal before today's episode. Um, the pod recently got a discord server - which is *really* exciting - which you can find in the episode description if you'd like to hang out with other folks who are very, very into The Oh Hellos, Narnia, and generally anything comforting and queer and fantasy-themed. We do also talk about the show there. It's a good time.

And recently in the server, Jupiter, Sparrow, Rachel, and Nat all made some absolutely FANTASTIC Back Again, Back Again-themed playlists which SLAP - so I wanted to give them a quick shout-out!! I've spent far too much time listening to them recently - so thank y'all so much for your impeccable music taste!!

And - onto today's episode!!

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty two: Soldier.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I hate talking about kissing Cassius Rex. I hate talking about kissing. I feel like I should have ended the last entry with that.

But -- I didn't. So. Disclaimer.

Not that it's helping my case, but I couldn't stop thinking about our -- kiss. Kisses. Kissing. Maybe if I just say the word *kiss* enough times, it'll lose all meaning and I'll stop sitting here flushed red because of the sheer amount of times I've said it.

Kiss. Kiss. Kiss. It's not helping. God, I think it's making it worse.

I -- I'll stop. This is awful.

Days passed. We continued like normal, like friends, largely like it had never happened. Mornings were spent sparring and afternoons preparing, *preparing*, because we would ride out at the end of the week for another raid, this one a full day's march away. My anxiety crept up. I woke up, shaky, heart racing and eyes wet, from nightmares where I died or Cassian did -- or Cassian was killing people, faceless people, and then was trying to kiss me with blood all over his face -- Rhia died, or Rhia

killed, or I killed, and the *slunk* of a blade sliding in sounded just the way it had when I'd gotten stabbed.

It -- god, it messed with my head. Do you know when you dream about someone and you can't quite look them in the eye the next day? It was that, but worse, and I --

They're not good dreams to have. They're not good to remember, either.

It was the morning of the raid, and Rhia handed me a list of words Cassian had sent the day before. We'd spent the evening practicing them -- I'd begged her to stay up late with me and she'd insisted I needed to rest until a concession was made, a middle ground where we lay down beside each other and sang songs she'd taught me until she fell asleep.

So you can look over them while you're away, she explained as I folded the list into my pocket. *Away*. A gentle word. Her eyes told me she knew what my nights had been, and I was thankful she didn't say anything more.

I thanked her for the words and presented her the shitty drawings I'd done the night before, while she was asleep and I couldn't, of us on the roof -- stick figures labeled with our names and a billion stars staining the sky -- the best I could do at a gift. *So you don't miss me while I'm gone*, I joked, before she crushed me into a hug. I squeezed her tight, burying my head in her shoulder.

Thank you, I whispered. Gratinoc. For everything.

Be safe, she said. Promise me you'll be safe.

Rhia, I can't --

Promise me you'll come back.

I made a promise I couldn't be certain I'd keep and squeezed her hand one last time before heading out.

I met Cassian in the arena, as he and his soldiers checked bags and weapons and horses and shouted at each other to be heard over the din of Rhysean. I was wearing my armor and had my sword by my side, a small comfort, and as he saw me he pulled from his pocket a small jar of golden paint.

We don't fight today, I said.

It's for luck, he replied, so I held still as he dragged it down my left cheek and across the right side of my forehead, two lines each, then copied it onto his.

Just for a moment, I remembered the blood from my dreams, smeared across his face in the same way. I shut down the thought before my heart rate kicked up.

Gratinoc, I said, as he sealed the jar back away. He brightened at my Rhysean.

Do you have the list I sent? He asked, and I nodded. They were all battle words, command words, except for one that was both not-quite and also very-much-so:

The word for *dead*. Which, in Rhysean, can just as easily mean *lost*.

pertus.

The company was larger than last time -- forty or fifty soldiers, all in armor. Most would be on foot -- we had time, the village was a day's walk away and Cassian wanted us all well-rested before the next morning's battle. He gave orders in his princeling voice, a sharp-edged, booming Rhysean, as I stood to his side in my armor and paint, trying not to let my fear show.

We rode out. Cassian and I were both mounted, along with the captain of the guard and a few battalion leaders Cassian drafted his legion from -- Hildegarde, the captain of the guard, rode beside us, Cassian in the middle, I on the left and her on the right. They were an older soldier -- older than us, anyways, not a very accomplished feat, but one that made our youth all the more stark. Hildegarde was maybe in her late thirties and had the body of a soldier, muscled and able, and airs of experience that even Cassian didn't give off. They sat in their saddle like it was a throne, their tawny hands loose in the reins. Cassian talked with her in Rhysean as we made our way along, the two of them falling into old banter.

They taught me to fight, he explained. *And I was explaining that I've been teaching you in turn*. He laughed as Hildegarde

said something else, voice gruff. *She says that you would be better off learning from her* -- he switched back to Rhysean, a jab that began with *but I say that*, the rest lost in translation. The two of them snipped back and forth with each other, laughing.

Eligida, I finally heard, and snapped back into the conversation. Hildegarde stared at me, not unkindly, awaiting a response.

She repeated herself at my blank stare, slow Rhysean that I managed to pick apart - something like, *Your magic, Eligida?*

They waved a hand around.

They want a demonstration, Cassian supplied, and I started.

Oh. Oh, okay. I fumbled with my grip on the reins so I could strike my hands together and murmured *vienil*, sending wind shaking through the tops of the trees, picking up the leaf rot from years past and sending it skittering around the feet of the soldiers. I pushed at it until my ears rang, the trees shaking as I tried to expand my focus beyond the small areas I'd practiced.

Hildegarde nodded, sated. Maybe it was impressed. I couldn't say. Cassian grinned at me, though, and mouthed a *thank you*. I smiled back.

It wasn't until the sun was beginning to fall that we stopped to set camp. The battalion was maybe an hour's walk away

from our target, close enough to ensure the soldiers weren't exhausted come battle, far enough to give warning from scouts if the rebels found us and launched their own attack. I stood off to the side, awkwardly, as the soldiers assembled camp, setting up fires and tying up the horses and bringing out blankets and bedrolls. Tents, apparently, were something of a taboo for these short little trips. The *why* was explained much later -- why we sleep under-the-stars when we're on long journeys -- but it wasn't by Cassian.

I won't make you wait for that part of the story for the *why*, dear listener. See, first, of course, it's lighter. No tents mean less weight, and when you're marching on foot, that's important.

Second, tents are a sign of permanence -- if you're putting up tents, you're there for the long haul -- for more than a simple passing-through. If that's not your intention, it can be a bad omen -- a jinx, I guess, is a better word. There's a word in Rhysean that's a combination of the two: *augerton*. It's like... a warning that you're jinxing yourself. If you set up a permanent camp without the intention of permanence, you're daring fate to make it so you can't leave.

Plus, as I was also told, the stars are always more brilliant while on an adventure.

By the time the sky had gone fully dark, campfires roared and the crew had drug logs and rocks around to sit on, booming stories or hurtling insults across the fires. Cassian and I sat by each other, surrounded by his soldier-friends, all eating the bread and dried meat we'd brought and not minding the shitty taste because the air smelled like adventure and promise and even though it was loud and still foreign, something I'd never done before, it was easy to see the allure, the camaraderie. When they started singing, starting at marching songs and tilting into ballads, they all laughed and made exaggerated notions of surprise as there came some I knew, learned from Cassian, learned from Rhia, and I added my shitty voice to the mix.

They all talked circles around me as the night wore on -- the fast sniping of people who had grown up together. In the firelight and dark, Cassian was indistinguishable from the rest of them, no more a prince than anyone sitting opposite. His voice had lost the king's lilt he kept around his parents, the court, the one he'd told me a tutor drilled into him after I'd joked about it. There was an ease to his shoulders you were hard-pressed to find in him at the castle, and from the way he sniped back, just as passionately as anyone else, they didn't see him a king, aloof and separate, as much as a friend, someone

who'd earned his place, someone who they'd follow not out of duty but soul-deep loyalty.

No one said much to me -- or, at least, I didn't catch mention of my name among the mix. In passing, I joked to Cassian about this -- something stupid, I can't even recall what my comment had been -- but his response, meant to be another joke, was delivered a little bit ingenuinely all the same: *they must just be scared of you, Vatakina Eligida, or worry that you will curse them.*

Vatakina Eligida. Meant to poke fun at my title, but there was something still so -- odd -- about it coming from his mouth. I was always Ilyaas to him.

And then, later, I heard *Eligida* again, but not from Cassian's mouth -- another soldier's, who sat across the fire: the words were fragmented, as they always were when I tried to follow along, but I could hear enough that sparked that insidious doubt back into my heart.

The words were *Eligida* and *vikina* and *allemim a ilms*. *Prophecy girl* and *orders* and *we -- not you -- can't talk to her*, and they were tossed to Cassian, just another joke among the many of the night.

It was phrased like a question, said like a joke. But Cassian turned slightly red in the firelight as the soldier said it. He very deliberately did not look at me as he shot back a

curt response and shoved half a roll into his mouth, the air suddenly growing thick and cold.

I don't know if he was being deliberately difficult, but I hadn't known any of the words in his response.

But no matter how you phrased it, the meaning was the same. *Why did you order us not to talk to the prophecy girl? Why are the orders to not talk to the Eligida?*

Was he that afraid of what I could learn in three conversations and a drinking song? Or was he afraid of the prerequisite it would set?

And... doubt comes in. That something wasn't right with him. With this whole thing.

And that doubt? It doesn't leave.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of

this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.